



Press-Gazette photo by John Roemer

Closing shop: Her heavenly baked goods have earned Emma Conard the title of "Belgian Angel." She celebrated her retirement by baking 20 loaves of bread.

Bar is closed, but kitchen still open

Emma Conard celebrated her birthday a few weeks early by closing up shop.

On July 1, she and her husband, Cletus, locked the door for the final time at Conard's Bar, 2262 University Ave. She will turn 75 on Thursday.

On her first day of retirement, she did what she likes to do best. She baked 20 loaves of bread. As she has done for years, she gave most of it to family and friends, keeping just enough for her own needs.

Emma had never worked away from home before she and her first husband, Walter Ronsman, bought the neighborhood bar 35 years ago. They moved here from Sturgeon Bay where her husband was a police officer.

"I didn't have the gift of gab then like I do now," said the friendly bartender whom many customers called "Mom." She is also called "The Belgian Angel" because the breads and Belgian pies that come from her kitchen often are described as heavenly.

Emma and Walter moved into the bar with their four children, then had two more, a set of twins. "While we renovated the bar and living quarters, we lived in the basement."

She worked seven days a week for 20 years. Walter died in 1962, five years after the family moved to Green Bay. She raised her children alone until 1965 when she married Cletus Conard, who gave up his job at the Preble Bank to work with his wife. Another child was born to this union.

"I loved those years, I love to work, but now it's time for me to enjoy my family," Emma said. Still, closing the bar wasn't easy.

"You'd better believe I'll miss it," she said. "My customers were not just customers, they were friends."

Conard's was a neighborhood, family bar that served three generations of patrons. Those patrons are wondering where they'll go for their morning card games.

"We only had to call the police once in 35 years, and the man was gone before they got here," she said.

Despite the family atmosphere, however, Emma's children were not allowed in the bar.

Emma was a non-drinking bartender. "I just never liked it," she said.

She and Cletus never hired a bartender, except for her son, Ronnie, who died in 1971. When Emma and Cletus went on vacation, the bar was closed.

"We went to Europe twice, on a Caribbean cruise, to Florida and Mexico, and we go to Las Vegas twice a year," she said. Wherever she goes, Emma finds a place to dance. "I love to polka," she said.

"Things have changed a lot since the day of dime beers," Emma said. Except for pickled eggs, food was not served unless there was a special occasion.

When the bar-closing party was being planned, Emma considered serving booyah but the customers wanted sandwiches on her homemade bread. "I got up at 2 a.m. and baked 24 loaves of bread so it would be fresh," she said.

Teaching Emma to relax is going to be a big job, said her daughter, Joan Jarstad: "When you visit," she told her mom, "You won't have to sit on the edge of the chair anymore because you have to leave early to go to work."

Emma said she has a lot of catching up to do.

"Although I was always here for my children, I didn't get to do a lot of things with them. That's going to change," she said. "Now I'll have time to teach them to bake the bread and the Belgian pies, just like two of my grandchildren, Stacy and Lisa Michalec, are learning to do."

Emma won't miss out on any family get-togethers, and she'll still cook the Thanksgiving dinner for her children and grandchildren. Ronnie's wife has remarried and she and her husband and Ronnie's children still share the holidays with the Conards.

Kerin's column features active and interesting people over 60. If you have a suggested profile, write to Kerin at Press-Gazette, P.O. Box 19430, Green Bay, Wis., 54307-9430.



Lois Kerin

Life after 60